

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 03321 863 5

4352
.24

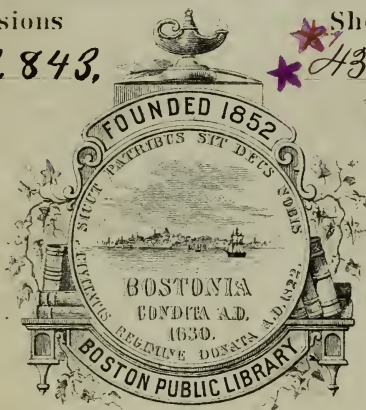
NOT TO BE
REBOUND

Accessions

243.843,

Shelf No.

4352.24



Received Mar 22. 1878.

5723 19

HISTORY

OF THE

Free Congregational Society

OF

FLORENCE, MASS.:

WITH ITS

PLATFORM, BY-LAWS,

AND

EXTRACTS FROM ANNUAL REPORTS.

NORTHAMPTON :
METCALF AND COMPANY, PRINTERS.
1876.

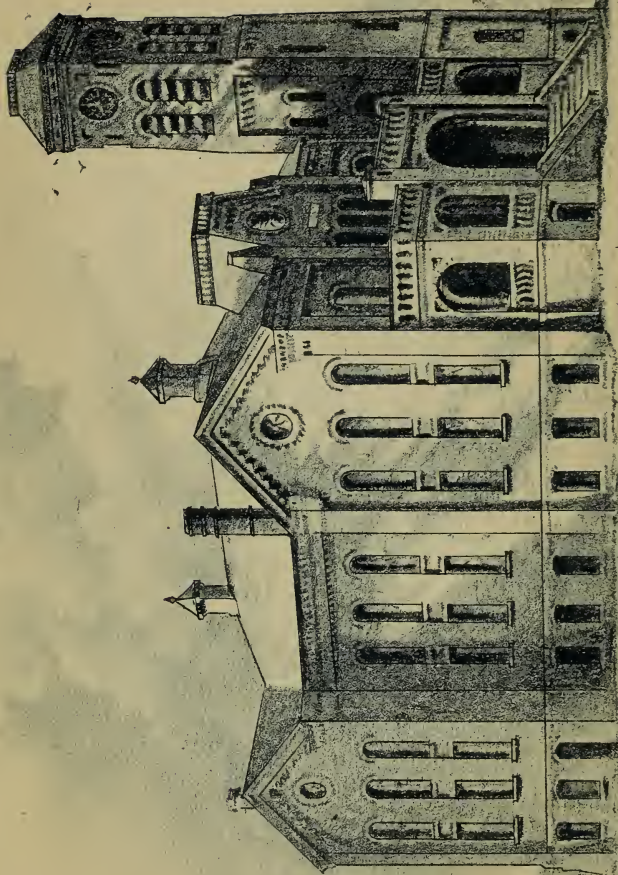
87-2 19

HISTORY
OF THE
Free Congregational Society
OF
FLORENCE, MASS.:
WITH ITS
PLATFORM, BY-LAWS,
AND
EXTRACTS FROM ANNUAL REPORTS.

NORTHAMPTON:
METCALF AND COMPANY, PRINTERS.

1876.





C. C. Burleigh Jr.

COSMIAN HALL.

STAR LITH. NO HAMP MASS

HISTORY

OF THE

Free Congregational Society

OF

FLORENCE, MASS.:

WITH ITS

PLATFORM, BY-LAWS,

AND

EXTRACTS FROM ANNUAL REPORTS.

NORTHAMPTON :

METCALF AND COMPANY, PRINTERS.

1876.

Free Congregational Society

OF FLORENCE, MASS.



THIS Society was probably the first religious body in the world to organize on a platform of entire freedom of thought and speech.

About thirty-five years ago, a band of noble men and women tried at Florence, a somewhat crude experiment of a new form of social life. Their ideal was high, their motives evidently pure ; but their pecuniary means being too limited for the successful working of their praiseworthy undertaking, the enterprise was, after a few years, given up. In all their public meetings, freedom of discussion was maintained. Some of the members of the association remained in Florence, and they and their friends held Sunday meetings in that place, though not regularly, down to the time of the formation of the Free Congregational Society of Florence.

In pursuance of the following call, signed by twenty-seven citizens of Florence who had been interested in these Sunday exercises, and who believed that the friends of religious freedom should avail themselves of the strength there is in union and organized effort, a meeting was held at the time and place therein named.

TO THE PEOPLE OF FLORENCE AND VICINITY:

All interested in the promotion of good morals, general education and liberal religious sentiments, whether Catholic or Protestant, or of whatever sect, creed, or nationality, are invited to meet in the South School House, on Sunday, May 3, 1863, at 3½ o'clock, P. M., to organize arrangements for the better attainment of the objects above-named.

At the meeting, a Society was organized by the adoption and signing of the following

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT.

We, the undersigned, inhabitants of Florence and its vicinity in the town of Northampton, wishing to avail ourselves of the advantages of associate effort for our advancement in truth and goodness, and for the promotion of general intelligence, good morals and liberal religious sentiments, do hereby agree to form ourselves into a body corporate under the name of the FREE CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY OF FLORENCE.

Respecting in each other and in all the right of intellect and conscience to be free, and holding it to be the duty of every one to keep his mind and heart, at all times open to receive the truth and follow its guidance, we set up no theological condition of membership and neither demand nor expect uniformity of doctrinal belief; asking only unity of purpose to seek and accept the right and true, and an honest aim and effort to make these the rule of life. And, recognizing the brotherhood of the human race and the equality of human rights, we make no distinction as to the condi-

tions and rights of membership in this Society, on account of sex, or color or nationality.

The officers of this Society shall be a Moderator, Clerk, and Treasurer, who shall be first chosen at the first business meeting of the Society, and afterwards at each annual meeting thereof, and shall perform the customary duties of their respective offices.

The Society shall hold its annual meeting on the first Monday in April, at such hour and place as the Moderator of the preceding year shall appoint.

BY-LAWS.

1st. All subscribers to the articles of association shall be considered members of the Society wherever they reside, so long as they manifest by their lives, an honest purpose to promote its objects.

2d. The officers of the Society shall be chosen by ballot, unless at the meeting at which they are to be chosen some other method shall be proposed through the presiding officer and shall be adopted by unanimous vote or by silent assent of all the members present.

3d. A majority of all the votes given shall be necessary to the choice of any officer, unless three attempts to obtain such majority shall have failed ; in which case, at the fourth trial, the person having a larger number of votes than any other person shall be considered chosen, though that number should not be a majority of the whole number given.

4th. Standing Committees shall be annually chosen, which shall be :

First. An Executive Committee of *three* members, to make arrangements for carrying into effect the votes and resolutions of the Society.

Second. A Library Committee of three members, to take measures for establishing a Library and Reading Room, to select books and periodicals for the same and have the charge of them when established.

Third. A Committee of five members on Music, to provide for singing in our public meetings, and promote as far as may be, improvement therein.

Fourth. A School Committee of three or more members, to take measures for opening and keeping up Sunday Schools under the auspices of the Society.

5th. In case of the Moderator's absence from any meeting of the Society, the meeting shall be called to order by the Clerk, and a Moderator *pro tem.* shall be chosen by nomination and show of hands. Should the Moderator and Clerk be both absent, both offices shall be filled *pro tem.* in like manner, on call of the Treasurer, or, in his absence, of any other member.

6th. The Moderator may call a special meeting of the Society whenever he thinks it desirable; and it shall be his duty to call one, whenever five members shall request him in writing to do so.

7th. It shall be the duty of the Clerk to give public information of the hour and place of each Annual meeting, and the day, hour and place of each special meeting, by posting written notices of the same in two or more conspicuous places, at least seven days before the meeting notified is to be held.

When it became necessary to build or provide a suitable house for its place of meeting it was

found that the Society was not incorporated as the statute required in order to hold property. To secure this right a new organization was formed on the 10th of April, 1872; the old Society continuing, on its original platform, to exercise all the educational and religious functions for which it was originally founded.

Charles C. Burleigh, who had been for a number of years prior to May 3, 1863, employed as Sunday lecturer at Florence, remained as resident speaker of the Free Congregational Society of Florence, from that date until April 6, 1873, when he resigned. In May, 1871, Miss Elizabeth M. Powell, now Mrs. Henry H. Bond, began to officiate as associate resident speaker, and continued until May, 1872, when Rowland Connor took her place, and officiated in that capacity, until the resignation of Mr. Burleigh, when Mr. Connor became resident speaker; and held the office until August 1st, 1874. From this last mentioned date, the Society had no resident speaker until September 1st, 1875, when David H. Clark, the present incumbent, took the office.

The resident speaker is not, like the minister or pastor of other religious societies, the mouth-piece of the members, voicing the doctrines of a cast-iron creed; he speaks only for himself, and his utterances like those of any other member are open at all times to criticism. He is usually engaged to speak for a portion of the year; as it is the

purpose, and has been the practice of the Society, to have, during each year, a variety of speakers; so that every phase of thought shall be fairly represented.

When the Society was first organized, its meetings were held in the District School House; but on Sunday, April 17th, 1864, it began to hold meetings in the new chapel and hall built for the purpose, in the then new building called Florence Hall. The use of the chapel, hall and library room, for ten years, was given to the Society, by its President. In 1874, a spacious and beautiful edifice, called Cosmian Hall, was completed, having been erected for the uses of the Society, by the subscriptions of members and others; the larger part being contributed by its generous-hearted President. Cosmian Hall cost about \$40,000 and includes an attractive and richly decorated auditorium, capable of seating 700 persons, a choice organ, and a spacious and amply furnished stage, upon which dramatic entertainments are frequently given during the winter. The basement contains "Lower Cosmian Hall", and a suite of rooms which constitute the parlors and culinary department of the "Ladies' Industrial Union", an auxiliary of the Society.

The hall last mentioned is occupied on Sundays by the Cosmian Sunday School, and on week days for occasions of social recreations. The Ladies' Parlors on Sundays, are devoted to classes of the

Sunday School; and on week days to the Ladies' Industrial Union, social and literary gatherings.

The Free Congregational Society of Florence represents the growing tendency of the human mind, in our age, to outstrip circumscribing ecclesiastical barriers; the conviction of a possible fellowship of spirit with diversity of belief; aspiration toward a higher standard of culture than the church presents.

It neither accepts any verbal statement of faith nor seeks to impose any on others.

It encourages absolute intellectual freedom and individual independence.

Its ideal is: the most comprehensive and practical service to mankind; the fullest and most perfect development of the nature of each human being.

It is the custom of the Society to hold public meetings in upper Cosmian Hall, every Sunday afternoon. The exercises vary according to the person who conducts them. They consist sometimes of a sermon, prayer, and the usual choir and musical accompaniments of public religious services; sometimes of a lecture or address, with the omission or adoption of such concomitants as the speaker may prefer. The resident minister occupies the desk in the absence of other appointments for this office.

It is the aim of the Society to maintain a Free Platform; to offer a cordial welcome to all shades

of honest conviction and opinion. It has been addressed by women as well as men,—the representatives of Judaism, Orthodox, and Heterodox Christianity, Spiritualists, Scientists, Theists, and Atheists, and cherishes the persuasion that in this free exchange of ideas, and hospitality to diverse religious theories, is the surest promise of the Truth, which Lord Bacon pronounces “the sovereign good of human nature.”

Among the prominent names who have addressed the Society, some of them repeatedly, are Theodore D. Weld, John Weiss, Samuel Longfellow, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, D. A. Wasson, Charles E. Norton, A. Bronson Alcott, Parker Pillsbury, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Wm. J. Potter, Frederick Douglass, M. D. Conway, William Lloyd Garrison, Francis E. Abbott, Beriah Green, Aaron M. Powell, Mrs. Caroline H. Dall, Wm. H. Burleigh, Henry C. Wright, Lucy Stone, Rabbi Schleisinger, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Samuel Johnson, Josiah P. Quincy, Horace Seaver, John W. Chadwick, Mrs. Frances D. Gage, William Denton, Susan B. Anthony, S. H. Morse, Giles B. Stebbins, J. L. Hatch, Mrs. E. A. Kingsbury, Dio Lewis, B. F. Underwood, Mrs. Lillie Devereux Blake, Prof. S. C. Chandler, John T. Sargent, Frederic Frothingham, S. J. Finney, John F. Moors, Erastus Hopkins, Susan H. Wixon, Elder F. W. Evans, Dr. R. T. Trall, Mrs. M. W. Campbell, Chas.

Lenox Remond, Mrs. F. E. W. Harper, Edward C. Towne, Mrs. Nellie T. Brigham, Stephen S. Foster, Henry B. Blackwell and George Thompson.

The members of the Society early saw the importance of instilling into the minds of the young the principles on which the Society is founded, and at almost the very outset of its career, the members organized a Sunday School, which has been maintained to the present time with great success and usefulness. To show their idea of the value of this new kind of Sunday School, a class of adult members was formed which has been kept up to the present time. In this free Sunday School, to which every Sunday forenoon is devoted both the young and old are profited and cheered by music, by declamations, by exhortations, by discussions, by lessons in science, literature and goodness; and all are encouraged to read, think and speak with entire freedom on all subjects relating to man's welfare. In addition to the adult class for conversational discussions, and the children's classes, for moral instruction, there have been others for the study of Natural History, Drawing, Book-keeping, the French and German languages, Botany, Physiology, Political Economy and Shakespeare; all taught by competent teachers.

The Superintendent of the Sunday School, in the last annual report, says: "It is gratifying to

announce that the number of its attendance is somewhat greater than a year ago, and there are unmistakable and cheering signs of its growth and improvement. It is found on reviewing the year of this report that between April 4th, 1875, and April 2d, 1876, there were fifty-three Sundays. There were five of these upon which the attendance of the school was not numerically recorded. The aggregate attendance for the remaining forty-eight Sundays was 4056, or an average, stated with mathematical precision, of $84\frac{1}{2}$ per Sunday. The largest attendance on any one Sunday was 110; the smallest 44. There are now, (April, 1876,) eleven classes in the school, or one more than a year ago."

We quote farther from the Superintendent's report as to the doings of classes Nos. 1 and 2.

•• Class No. 1. This is known as the adult class. It includes the oldest members of the school of both sexes. The subject for consideration has been Religion, in its historical and philosophical aspects. It has embraced an inquiry into its significance, and most primary manifestations, with the ultimate aim of a more thorough acquaintance with the various religious systems of mankind. It has in pursuance of this research, devoted considerable attention to the chapters in "Darwin's Descent of Man", on the mental and moral nature of animals; and also consulted to the same end, Lubbock's Origin of Civilization, the works of

Max Muller, and others of like authority bearing upon the general theme. But while the subject indicated has been the leading one of the class, it has partaken largely of a conversational character; and has substituted from time to time, such topics as has been suggested by passing events.

Class No. 2 is devoted to the study of the poetical works of Milton. Its attention has been exclusively given to *Paradise Lost*. The plan of study has embraced a critical examination of the characteristics of the genius of its author, as exhibited in his great epic, with expository comments and references to the mythological and classical allusions of the text. This class is composed of young ladies and gentlemen."

The fact that Cosmian Hall is provided with a stage containing all the scenic arrangements required for dramatic representations, shows that the members of the Society believe that the powerful instrumentality of the drama can, and should be wielded to advance the happiness and elevation of mankind. They look forward to the not distant time, when the most impressive Sunday exercise will be found to consist of a well ordered play which shall vividly represent, by action and personation, examples of noble conduct with its rewards, and of vice, with its retributions. Avarice and immorality have too often used the stage for base purposes. Let it be the work of Cosmians to consecrate it to purity and all that is human-

izing and ennobling. The dramatic element is inherent in man's nature, and, instead of stifling it, provision should be made for its highest and best exercise.

Having now had a prosperous organized existence of over thirteen years the Society believes it has worked out the problem of securing unity of effort with diversity of beliefs, and it would therefore urge liberals every where to organize on a basis similar to its own. In fact, it holds that every society which has been formed to promote knowledge and goodness would be more effective by having its bond of union tempered to the elasticity of freedom and manly independence.

The need of such organizations as the Free Congregational Society of Florence will be apparent to all thoughtful observers. When we find in this enlightened age, men of culture and in high positions, advocating the wild project of ingrafting sectarianism into the United States constitution, it is evident that the lessons and examples of free thought cannot be too numerous, nor too conspicuous. Here are men organizing a party, to rob the American people of their most precious inheritance,—freedom of conscience. And this is being done at the very time when the people of the Old World are struggling to throw off the burden of church domination, which, in their long experience, they find to be a curse and a snare. It is, therefore necessary, at this late day, to teach what

it to be truisms in America, that religion must be voluntary, and that the State must never enforce a theological dogma. Thus here, as in many other directions, there is plenty of work for free organizations.

But the primal necessity for free societies is founded in the very constitution of man. The human mind being expansive, freedom is essential to its healthful growth, and to enable man to perfect himself. And yet, liberty, while giving greater power for good, brings greater responsibilities. Remembering this, free societies should so wield the forces at their command, as to make all within the sphere of their influences, wiser, happier and better.

While not denying that much good may have been done by bodies styling themselves, churches; we reject their claim to be the only channels of religious influences. We also protest against their restraining within the narrow limits of their petty creeds, the boundless aspirations of the human mind after knowledge; and we abjure their monstrous fallacy that one book, written during the infantile and semi-civilized conditions of the race, comprises the sum total of theological truth, and exhausts the Infinite Mind. When any church, whatever its name, however remote its antiquity, or high-sounding its pretensions to divine origin, uses its power to stifle free thought, and blind the minds of its members to the light of truth and

reason, it becomes an obstacle to the progress and welfare of mankind. If such a church claims “the gates of hell shall not prevail against us,” we reply, True,—but the gates of *heaven will*.

OFFICERS FOR 1876.

Moderator—Samuel L. Hill.

Clerk—A. G. Hill.

Treasurer—A. T. Lilly.

Executive Committee—Seth Hunt, A. T. Lilly and Joseph Marsh.

Committee on Music—L. F. S. Plympton, Mrs. M. B. Learned and George Shepard.

Committee on Sunday School—D. H. Clark, Miss M. W. Bond, Mrs. H. Clark, Miss Sarah Titcomb and J. M. Davis.

Committee on Charity—A. Eldredge, E. L. Hammond, Mrs. Henry Gould, H. Townend, R. M. Branch and Miss Julia M. Lilly.



